

The Fall of Critical Thinking



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The Covid panic and repression did not happen in a vacuum. A pattern of persecuting people rather than engaging those with dissenting opinions had already been well-established in the educational world and the mainstream mass media, making the oppressive treatment Covid dissenters experienced somewhat predictable. There was an obvious, widespread failure to apply critical thinking.

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Once upon a time, the educational world had a golden opportunity to improve itself dramatically. The critical thinking movement captured the attention of many in the university world and K-12 education in the 1980s and early 1990s. Richard Paul, a prominent figure in the movement, hosted an annual Conference on Critical Thinking in Sonoma, California, in which I participated several times and learned a lot from people such as Paul and Robert Ennis.

Exposure to the movement's perspective and methods transformed my approach to teaching students and comprehending ideas and information. Until then I had often been perplexed in dealing with many of my Japanese junior college students, who had a tendency simply to parrot ideas they encountered in the mass media and books, rather than thinking for themselves.

In particular, I was shocked to find some student research papers echoing the anti-Semitic views of a Japanese journalist, who believes that the destruction of Israel is the only solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The students had uncritically accepted his radical opinions as unquestionable truths.

"Critical thinking" is not so much an educational invention as it is a distillation of the intellectual tradition of rational, skeptical inquiry into concepts and claims. Famous for his probing questions about the assertions of those around him, the Greek philosopher Socrates was one prominent embodiment of that approach. Though I had never heard the term *critical thinking* (which I will abbreviate as "CT") during my formal education, I immediately recognized what it was.

However, that opportunity to strengthen the role of CT in education has been lost. To a great degree, this promising development has been replaced by fashionable, irrational ideology and indoctrination into trendy causes.

In general, the current outlook embraces a strong rejection of the concept of objective truth. One of the first blows to CT came with the popularity of cultural relativism. Once common mainly among cultural anthropologists, many in academia began to espouse the idea that it is out of bounds to claim to possess any knowledge of objective reality.

For instance, in 1993 this view was declared to be current orthodoxy for all language teachers by the plenary speaker at the annual meeting of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). The speech, titled “How Not to Be a Fluent Fool,” explicitly denigrated those holding to the concept of objective truth. Subsequently, in a JALT publication I challenged cultural relativism as incoherent and self-contradictory, as others in the CT movement have observed.

Under the banner of postmodernism, similar thinking took hold of the international field of foreign language pedagogy, with the result that doing CT in the classroom was also questioned. As I understand it, postmodernism is basically cultural relativism with a collectivist bent.

New Left intellectuals have usually rejected both rationality and traditional objectivity as tools of oppression. As Roger Scruton has pointed out, that is a very convenient stance for them to take, since it absolves them of any need to justify their assertions rationally. Then no one can dispute any absurdity (e.g., “All white people are racists” in Critical Race Theory).

That was not true of a number of old school Leftists, such as the writer Christopher Hitchens and the novelist George Orwell, a socialist who believed strongly in objective truth and the individual’s right to express opinions about it. They were willing to engage in civil debate with those who disagree.

In contrast, New Left intellectuals have largely dispensed with such niceties. When their views came to dominate the academic, educational, and media worlds, an ideological intolerance often labeled “political correctness,” “cancel culture,” or “woke” became prevalent. Concerned about this phenomenon, organizations such as the National Association of Scholars and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education came into being to advocate for freedom of expression to debate truth in educational circles.

Unfortunately, postmodern, irrational, New Left-style education has already produced many people whose typical reaction to contrary ideas is to attack and/or exclude their proponents. The concept of cool-headed debate about truth is alien to the new mindset. Naturally enough, many with that mentality also reacted similarly to

skepticism about government-mandated, media-hyped Covid measures, so they had no problem with parroting slogans and bullying dissenters.

Along with that tendency, many contemporary people have learned to privilege subjective emotions over reason and truth. Theodore Dalrymple calls this phenomenon "toxic sentimentality" and shows how many these days are more impressed by tears than by truth.

For instance, suspects in murder cases have been condemned though they were innocent because they did not manage to shed tears in public, while real murderers have often escaped condemnation by making impressive displays of strong emotions while claiming innocence.

Nowadays many become impatient with rational, evidence-driven argumentation and are easily convinced by strong feelings, such as fear. In an unsentimental age, someone like the hyper-emotional Greta Thunberg would never be taken seriously.

Meanwhile, popular entertainment is currently awash with politicized content that insults the intelligence of anyone who bothers to think much about it. At one time, Hollywood made many artistic, thoughtful movies and a number of intellectually-engaging TV programs. Now many YouTube critic-bloggers, such as The Critical Drinker and The Despot of Antrim, lament how movies and video shows have devolved into shallow, poorly-made propaganda.

The contemporary world often looks to technology to solve our ills. However, technical innovations like AI will not solve this particular problem, since AI cannot do critical thinking.

The most alarming aspect of the contemporary scene may actually not be things like the horrific potential of nuclear and biological weapons. Instead, it could be the rejection of objective truth and rational thought as essential guides to sensible conduct. When even the sciences and medicine become unmoored from reason and reality, we are all in serious trouble.

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